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Midnight Mixologists: Tommy Merolla

By BlackBook November 29, 2010

This eccentric authority on all things boozy is more than just your average bartender. For the past 16 years, Thomas Merolla has been mixing it up, creating sweet and savory cocktails that transport his patrons beyond your average bar experience. His cultivated skills have earned acclaim from the *Miami New Times*, and have won him a People's Choice Award for Ultimate Cocktail for a Cure. Currently, you can find Thomas developing his innovative ideas as the Mixologist and Creative Director at B Bar at the Betsy Hotel in Miami, while still finding time to create cocktail menus for various restaurants around town. With a host of mouth-watering specialties up his sleeve, Merolla is ingraining himself into Miami nightlife lore.

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How did you get into mixology?
I have been working at high-end bars for almost 16 years, beginning in 1995 at Ian Shraeger's Iconic Delano Hotel, and I recently helped open B Bar at The Betsy Hotel and Living Room at W Miami Beach, so I have always worked in trendsetting establishments. It was a natural transition to mixology.

What's the difference between a bartender and a mixologist?
A Mixologist understands every ingredient he uses and how those flavors balance and play off each other.

What's your favorite part of the job? Most annoying part?
I love interacting with people and creating a memorable experience at the bar for them; patrons who can't handle there liquor.

How do you name the drinks you create?
The names of my cocktails are always a reflection of either the ingredients, the spirit, or the style of the drink I have created.

How is your approach to mixology different from everybody else's?
I start with a base spirit and choose some flavors (liquors, herbs, vegetables, or fresh fruit) that I believe pair well with whichever base spirit I have chosen, and then build, balance, and create from there.

What was your inspiration for the cocktail you created for Stoli?
Being from New England, I love apples, so I just picked flavors that I knew would compliment and enhance the characteristics of the Stoli Applik.

What's the best compliment you've ever received as a mixologist?
A customer once told me that they never knew a cocktail could be an experience to remember, and that they would never forget the drink I made for them.

What does it take to be a great mixologist? Is it a god-given gift, or something you can learn?
Passion, a developed pallet, and always being a student of the craft. It is something one can develop.

How do you know when a customer has ordered and received exactly the right cocktail?
By the look on a patrons face when they take the first sip.

What's your favorite go-to ingredient and why?
I love ginger and basil. I am really into market-fresh culinary-style libations. These ingredients provide a great flavor base to work off.

What's the most important lesson about mixology you've learned in your years on the job?
To be humble enough to always learn and confident enough to execute!

Read more Midnight Mixologists interviews here.

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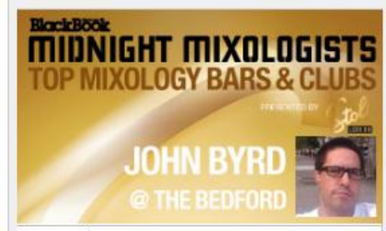

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